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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 YEREVAN 000463

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SUBJECT: UPDATE ON AMNESTY DEVELOPMENTS IN ARMENIA

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REFTELS: YEREVAN 451
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SUMMARY

¶1. (SBU) According to official sources, 215 prisoners had been
amnestied and released as of June 29. Four of them were the
individuals convicted for pro-ruling-party election fraud during
Yerevan's May 31 municipal election. According to the opposition
Armenian National Congress (ANC), 28 of its supporters jailed in
connection with the 2008 presidential election have been released as
a result of the amnesty, with approximately 20 more remaining in
jail, a majority of whom do not qualify for amnesty. The ANC will
break its previously declared three-month pause on rallies to hold a
rally on July 2 marking the release of its supporters. One
prominent oppositionist who helped lead the 2008 post-election
protests stated on his website that he would surrender himself soon,
after 16 months in hiding. On June 24 the Parliamentary Assembly of
the Council of Europe (PACE) welcomed the amnesty, but stated that
only the release of all jailed oppositionists would help "overcome
the political crisis" in Armenia. END SUMMARY.

STATISTICS

¶2. (SBU) According to Armenia's Ministry of Justice, 215 prisoners
have been released from Armenian prisons as of June 29 based on the
terms of the amnesty declared by Armenia's parliament on June 19. In
his speech at the National Assembly on June 19, Minister of Justice
Gevorg Danielian declared that the amnesty would affect
approximately 2,000 people, with 500 to be released from
incarceration and many others to have their sentences reduced.

FOUR VOTE-RIGGERS QUICKLY WALK FREE

¶3. (SBU) Among those released were the four men convicted of
election violations committed in favor of the ruling party during
Yerevan's May 31 mayoral election. Three of them served roughly 20
days, while a fourth was immediately amnestied after a
lightning-speed trial. In comparison, human rights activist
Arshaluis Hakobian, who filed an election-related complaint, remains
in prison since June 5 on dubious charges of assaulting two police
officers (ref A). He does not qualify for the amnesty since his
alleged crime occurred after the June 1 cutoff date (ref C).

NUMBER OF OPPOSITIONS RELEASED GROWS TO 28

14. (SBU) Among the 200 released as of June 26, 28 were ANC supporters jailed in connection with the disputed 2008 presidential election and its violent aftermath, including a former Foreign Minister, a former Deputy Prosecutor General, a former Minister of State Revenues, and two MPs (ref B). A third MP remains in prison, ineligible for amnesty because he was sentenced to eight years (five years was the amnesty's cutoff).

ANC'S AND AUTHORITIES' DUELING REACTIONS

15. (SBU) Levon Zurabian, ANC's Coordinator, stated June 25 that the release of ANC supporters will reinforce the opposition movement, but cautioned that the continued incarceration of approximately 20 others "proves that the ruling regime is not ready for national consolidation and a dialogue with opposition." Zurabian declared that the ANC will "toughen its struggle" if the authorities do not free the remaining prisoners.

ANC TO HOLD RALLY ON JULY 2

16. (SBU) On June 12, LTP had announced a three-month pause in ANC rallies, but the ANC chose to interrupt the pause in order to celebrate the release of its supporters. The ANC has obtained authorization for a rally on July 2, but a request to hold a post-rally march has been denied.

THE FUGITIVES

17. (SBU) ANC leaders have expressed doubt that six oppositionist

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fugitives wanted in connection with the March 1 events would give up, because they would have to stand trial. On June 24, however, prominent fugitive Nikol Pashinian released a statement on his website declaring his intention to turn himself in. He said he chose not to surrender earlier so he could support the ANC through his articles and statements, but now that his friends were out of jail "the time has come for me to become a political prisoner."

AMNESTIED MPS' MANDATES

19. (SBU) According to Armenian law, it appears that the two freed members of parliament will ultimately lose their mandates, though the precise timing will depend on the appeals process. However, contacts at the National Assembly say that its Legal Department has been instructed to find ways to let the MPs keep their mandates, since the authorities want to avoid new elections and the possibility of more election-related embarrassment. (Note: Hakob Hakobian was elected from the Malatia-Sebastia district in Yerevan, where fraud was rife during the May 31 municipal election. End Note.)

PACE ON AMNESTY

110. (SBU) In resolution 1677 passed on June 24, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) welcomed the amnesty, noting that Armenian authorities had complied with one of its crucial demands made after the 2008 presidential election. But PACE noted that only the release of all jailed oppositionists would "provide the necessary basis for the start of a dialogue and reconsolidation that is needed to overcome the political crisis." PACE also expressed concerns about the flagging investigation into the events of March 1-2, and continued restrictions on freedom of assembly and the media.

